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## *Introduction*

The doctrine of the Incarnation states that the second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God, the divine *Logos*, became the man, Jesus Christ, and lived on the earth at a set time in human history. This “God-man” was one Person with two distinct natures, at once divine and human without any diminishing or fusion of either nature. He was conceived, born, lived, died, was resurrected and eternally exalted.

Through nearly two thousand years of Church history much ink has been spilled over the doctrine of the Incarnation. Building on the foundation of some arguably vague Incarnational references in the synoptic Gospels and the epistles and an explicitly Incarnational approach in the FG the early church debated for nearly five centuries in an attempt to create a suitable formula to express the mystery of the Divine being united with humanity.<sup>1</sup> And whereas the formula created at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) served to set the boundaries of orthodox discussion for the next fifteen hundred years it also created more questions than answers.<sup>2</sup> So it was that the Scholastics and Reformers continued to mull over the details and implications of this one Person with two natures, often weary that their opponents were bordering on heresy.<sup>3</sup> With the Enlightenment and the subsequent growth of liberal theology came a new wave of criticisms against the orthodox view that had seldom been questioned in the past. As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century the questions concerning the Incarnation seem more numerous than ever, and yet the majority of evangelicals still hold to the basic tenets set forth in the ecumenical councils.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Macquarrie, “*Incarnation*,” in *The Blackwell encyclopedia of modern Christian thought*, ed. Alister McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 269—270.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997 ed., s.v. “*Incarnation*.”

<sup>3</sup> Rowan D. Williams, “*Incarnation*,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 2, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 675.

<sup>4</sup> Macquarrie, “*Incarnation*,” 271.

Herein we will expound upon the above thoughts, briefly addressing ourselves to the issues of the doctrine's biblical basis, its historic development including related heresies and controversies, and its current standing among evangelicals. In so doing we will discover many of the far reaching implications of the doctrine of Incarnation and gain an understanding of how it has taken shape throughout history.

*Part One: The Biblical Witness*

*The Gospels*

Whereas Macquarrie is probably overstating his case when he says that the FG is the *only* NT occurrence of a “definitely Incarnational teaching,”<sup>5</sup> we do well to start with the FG as it provides us with an explicit use of Incarnational language. More precisely, in John 1:14 we read that, “the Word became flesh and lived among us,” thus we have the basis of “Incarnation” (Lat. *in carō*, stem *carn* meaning “flesh”) terminology.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the prologue of John's gospel is probably the single greatest biblical witness to the Incarnation, that is, that the eternal *Logos* who was with God and indeed was God became the man Jesus Christ (John 1:1—18). The FG affords a number of other passages that appear to support the doctrine of the Incarnation (e.g. John 14:9; 17:1—25) but its witness does not stand alone in the NT.

In the synoptic Gospels we find traces of Incarnational teaching, notably in Matthew chapter one where Jesus is spoken of as being “conceived...from the Holy Spirit,” (v. 20), and “...Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” (v. 23) Mark's gospel opens with the title, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>6</sup> R.L. Reymond, “*Incarnation*,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d edition, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 601.

God,” (Mark 1:1). Further examples could be multiplied, but for the sake of brevity we will move on to the Pauline epistles and other NT writings.

### *The Pauline Epistles & Other NT Writings*

Despite Macquarrie’s claim that “It seems unlikely that Paul teaches an Incarnational Christology,”<sup>7</sup> it seems clear that Paul does indeed make repeated references to the Incarnation. For instance, Paul speaks of “the gospel of his [God’s] Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power...” (Rom 1:3—4) and of the fact that, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law...” (Gal 4:4). And whereas much has been made of the relatively few references to Jesus’ earthly life and teachings in the Pauline corpus the truth is that Paul testifies to both the humanity and the divinity of Christ in a number of passages (e.g. Rom 8:3; 9:5;<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor 2:8; 2 Cor 8:9).<sup>9</sup> Paul’s theology appears to be explicitly Incarnational in 1 Timothy 3:16 where speaking of Christ he writes, “He was revealed in flesh, [and] vindicated in spirit...”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Paul’s most poignant statements about the Incarnation are found in his letters to the churches in Philippi and Collosae. Speaking of Christ in his letter to the Philippians Paul writes, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly

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<sup>7</sup> Macquarrie, “Incarnation,” 270.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of whether Paul refers to Jesus as “God” in this passage see Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 48. For the opposing view see W.G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (London: Abingdon Press, 1973), 163—164.

<sup>9</sup> See Morris, 41—42 for a more complete treatment of Paul’s interest in Jesus’ earthly life.

<sup>10</sup> It is not within the scope of this paper to defend the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. For a helpful discussion of the problem see Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Doubleday: New York, 1997), 662—669.

exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name..." (Phil 2:6—9) In his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote that Jesus, "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created...He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Col 1:15—17) and later he states that, "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell," (Col 1:19; cf. 2:9).

Beyond the gospels and the epistles there is further NT evidence for the doctrine of the Incarnation. One may think of the high Christology of the book of Hebrews (esp. chapter one) or of the litmus test provided by the author(s) of first and second John for judging the spirits (i.e. "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." 1 Jn 4:2, cf. 2 Jn 7), or of the vision of an enthroned, eternal Jesus in the Apocalypse. Simply put, the biblical evidence seems rather substantial in support of a doctrine of Incarnation. One particular passage listed above has drawn a great deal of attention throughout the years and bears special mention at this time.

### *Kenosis*

In Philippians 2:7 Paul states that Christ Jesus "emptied himself." The exact meaning of this phrase has been the subject of a great deal of debate and as Leon Morris admits, "It cannot be said that the passage is easy to understand."<sup>11</sup> The Greek word that is translated "emptied" is a form of the word *kenoww* which can mean, "to empty oneself, to divest oneself of rightful dignity by descending to an inferior condition, to abase oneself."<sup>12</sup> However, Oepke states that this sense is ruled out by the context. Rather, he suggests that the meaning of the passage is "that the heavenly Christ did not selfishly

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary, New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1992), 857.

exploit His divine form and mode of being but by His own decision emptied Himself of it or laid it by, taking the form of a servant by becoming man.”<sup>13</sup> Zodhiates concurs stating that the Son in his pre-incarnate state was in the form of God, but chose to take on the form of man.<sup>14</sup>

The meaning of the *kenosis* passage became particularly important in the wake of the Reformation debates between the Lutheran and Calvinistic schools over the *communication idiomatum* (i.e. the communication of the divine attributes within the person of Christ). Out of these debates arose the “*kenosis* theory,” which in varied forms stated that the divine Logos divested himself of some or all of His divine attributes (e.g. omnipresence, omniscience, etc.) leaving only those attributes that were compatible with mankind (e.g. love, mercy, justice). However, the theory faced stiff opposition as it seemed to oppose the accepted notion that there were two natures (divine and human) within Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Over the years *kenosis* theorists have attempted to adapt the theory to orthodoxy and yet salvage what they see as the essential truth of the doctrine. They assert that the divine Logos did not *completely* set aside his divine attributes, but did so in a limited way, submitting the use of them to the will of the Father while he was on earth, thus giving up the independent exercise of certain powers.<sup>16</sup> This belief has gained popularity among evangelical scholars and is put forth well in a modified form by Millard Erickson in his *Christian Theology*.<sup>17</sup> Having considered the biblical evidence for the doctrine of

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<sup>13</sup> Oepke, “*kenós*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 661.

<sup>14</sup> Zodhiates, 857.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 400.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>17</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 734—735.

Incarnation and briefly examined the *kenosis* passage let us continue on to an investigation of the historic development of the doctrine in the Church.

*Part Two: The Church's Historical Testimony*

*Growth of the Doctrine from AD 30—451: Controversies & Heresies*

Even though it took several hundred years for the doctrine of the Incarnation to be satisfactorily articulated it was already taking shape in the NT.<sup>18</sup> Stanley Grenz even goes so far as to postulate that the debates over how Jesus could exist as one person with two natures did not originate with the church fathers, but with the NT community and are born out in the titles of Jesus as “Son” and “Word”.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the case may be, by the beginning of the patristic era there was a great deal of discussion and debate regarding the mystery of the Incarnation.

In answer to an early form of Docetism<sup>20</sup> Ignatius (died ca. AD 107) affirmed that “Jesus Christ...was of the family of David, the child of Mary, who was truly born...truly died...It was his Father who raised him again.”<sup>21</sup> Later, Irenaeus (fl. late 2d cent) affirmed the basic notion of two natures in one person in an early creedal formula that stated, “he [the Word of God, the Son of God] became a human being amongst human beings...”<sup>22</sup> These views were representative of many of the early church fathers who faced various heresies in the first two hundred to three hundred years after Christ’s death

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<sup>18</sup> Macquarrie, “*Incarnation*,” 269.

<sup>19</sup> Grenz, 391.

<sup>20</sup> Docetism was a form of Gnosticism that posited various claims, all of which pointed to the phantasmal nature of the physical form of Jesus. Basilides was an early proponent of the belief (Williams, “*Incarnation*,” 675).

<sup>21</sup> Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 136.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

and resurrection.<sup>23</sup> These heresies and the church councils held to renounce them helped to define the boundaries of orthodox thought<sup>24</sup> and should be considered briefly.

Before doing so however we should note that the debates were fueled by two powerful opposing schools of thought: Antiochian and Alexandrian. The Antiochian tradition often stressed the human aspects of the incarnate Christ which had a tendency to approximate Incarnation to inspiration, while the Alexandrian tradition stressed the divinity of the incarnate Christ, which had a tendency to approximate the Incarnation to a theophany.<sup>25</sup> Two issues were thus at stake in the debate: the full divinity of Christ and the full humanity of Jesus.

Perhaps the best known controversy related to the Incarnation was the one created by the Arian heresy in the beginning of the 4d century. Arius (AD 280—336) was believed to have taught the subordination of Christ based on John 14:29.<sup>26</sup> He was not alone in rejecting the teaching of Origen<sup>27</sup> and Paul of Samosata<sup>28</sup> but was led to the conclusion that the human soul was replaced in Jesus with the Word. Thus the Word, subject to limitations and sufferings, could not be wholly divine.<sup>29</sup> His view was rejected at the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicea (AD 325), where they reaffirmed the

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<sup>23</sup> See McGrath's *The Christian Theology Reader* for a wealth of poignant quotations from the church fathers along these lines.

<sup>24</sup> Macquarrie, "Incarnation," 269.

<sup>25</sup> Oxford, s.v. "Incarnation," 825.

<sup>26</sup> Macquarrie, "Incarnation," 270.

<sup>27</sup> Origen (ca. AD 185—ca. 254) taught that the pre-existent soul of Jesus is perfectly united with the Logos and transmits the power of the Logos to the flesh of Jesus. This view is referred to as "Origenism" (Williams, "Incarnation," 675).

<sup>28</sup> Paul of Samosata (d. after AD 272) taught that the impersonal Word inspired and exalted the man Jesus (Williams, "Incarnation," 675).

<sup>29</sup> Williams, "Incarnation," 675.

full divinity of Christ<sup>30</sup> with the statement that he is “of one substance (*homoousion*) with the Father”.<sup>31</sup>

Within sixty years of this council Apollinaris<sup>32</sup> of Laodicea was teaching that the Word replaced the *nous* or *hegemonikon* (i.e. the ruling intellectual principle) in Jesus.<sup>33</sup> That is, Apollinaris believed (possibly based on John 1:14) that the Logos simply animated a physical body, rather than assumed humanity in its completeness. He was condemned at the second ecumenical council, the Council of Constantinople (AD 382), where it was asserted that the Word had assumed a complete humanity, with a soul as well as a body.<sup>34</sup> So it was that by the beginning of the fifth century the Church had ruled that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human. However, the interrelation of these two natures in one person still required a great deal of definition.

All of this debate paved the way for one of the more mysterious controversies in the development of the doctrine. There are a number of questions surrounding the heresy that is attributed to Nestorius, so we will attempt to lay out the facts in an orderly fashion and be content to leave some questions unanswered. Nestorius was a student of Theodore of Mposuestia and probably reformulated much of his theology. Among Nestorius’ theological concerns were the Antiochian consideration that there could be no essential unity between the two natures within Christ, and that the “bearer of God” title that had been given to Mary was inappropriate.<sup>35</sup> Nestorius was installed as the patriarch of Constantinople in AD 428 and soon after was obliged to rule upon the suitability of referring to Mary as *theotokos* (i.e. “God-bearing”). In the wake of his ruling and

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<sup>30</sup> Macquarrie, “*Incarnation*,” 270.

<sup>31</sup> McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Also spelled “Appollinarius” (see Macquarrie, “*Incarnation*,” 271).

<sup>33</sup> Williams, “*Incarnation*,” 675.

<sup>34</sup> Macquarrie, “*Incarnation*,” 271.

<sup>35</sup> Grentz, 387.

subsequent debates he was opposed by powerful political figures such as Cyril of Alexandria (ca. AD 375—444) and Eusebius.<sup>36</sup>

Nestorius' personal views remain shrouded in obscurity<sup>37</sup> but he was believed (probably wrongly) to have taught a dualistic doctrine of Christ. Whatever the case, he was condemned at the third ecumenical council, the Council of Ephesus (AD 431).<sup>38</sup> It is now widely believed that it was probably Nestorius' followers and opponents who developed the views associated with him and that Nestorius was most likely not a "Nestorian."<sup>39</sup>

In the wake of the Council of Ephesus and in reaction against the Nestorian heresy Eutyches became the lead figure in a new controversy associated with a heresy commonly called Eutychianism or Monophysitism. In stark contrast to the dualistic Nestorian heresy, the monophysites taught that in Christ Jesus there was not only one person, but also only one nature. That is, that the divine nature became so joined with the human nature so as to either overtake it or to form a unique, "third nature" that was both divine and human, but essentially inseparable and indistinct.<sup>40</sup> It is not clear exactly what Eutyches believed and the details of this heresy are somewhat uncertain and sketchy.<sup>41</sup> However, it is noteworthy that the view was actually defended as orthodox (and the idea of two natures after the Incarnation anathematized) at a council meeting in Ephesus (AD 449) although this meeting was not held under the proper imperial authority and

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<sup>36</sup> Erickson, 727—728.

<sup>37</sup> Despite the fact that in one of his writings, *The Book of Heraclides*, he attempted to clarify his position some twenty years after his condemnation (Erickson, 728).

<sup>38</sup> Macquarrie, "Incarnation," 271.

<sup>39</sup> Erickson, 727.

<sup>40</sup> Grentz, 387.

<sup>41</sup> For a compelling account of the controversy see Erickson, 728—730.

eventually came to be referred to as the “Robber Synod”.<sup>42</sup> The controversy and “Robber Synod” all paved the way for the fourth ecumenical council to be held in Chalcedon where the definitive viewpoint of the church would be established for the next fifteen centuries.

*The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451)*

It should be clear by now that the Church was in need of a definitive statement concerning the relationship between the two natures within the one person of Christ Jesus. What was produced at the fourth ecumenical council, the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), was destined to become “the classic statement of orthodox Christian belief in the Incarnation”.<sup>43</sup> At the Council of Chalcedon they sought to hold the Antiochian and Alexandrian viewpoints in proper balance and create an answer to the various heresies that had been addressed in the past.<sup>44</sup> In so doing they also canonized Cyril’s language of a “hypostatic union,” although many of Cyril’s supporters believed that they did not do justice to his view.<sup>45</sup> Among the assertions of the Council were:

“We...confess our Lord Jesus Christ to be one and the same Son, perfect in divinity and humanity, truly God and truly human, consisting of a rational soul and a body, being of one substance with the Father in relation to his divinity, and being of one substance with us in relation to his humanity...[he] is to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation...each nature is preserved, and concurring into one Person and subsistence...”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Erickson, 729—730.

<sup>43</sup> Macquarrie, “*Incarnation*,” 271.

<sup>44</sup> Oxford, s.v. “*Incarnation*,” 825.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, “*Incarnation*,” 675. Cyril had died some five years prior to the council ca. AD 444.

<sup>46</sup> McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 148. It is worth reading the entire statement for a more complete understanding of the precision, and the limitations, of the Council’s pronouncement.

As powerful a statement as this was, and as much as it answered many of the preceding heresies, the future demonstrated that such a definition only provided boundaries in which the debate could indefinitely continue.<sup>47</sup> Erickson is right when he asserts that, “In a sense, Chalcedon is not the answer; it is the question.”<sup>48</sup> That is, by defining Jesus Christ as having two natures in one person the question was still left open as to how such an arrangement could take place and what the implications were. Part of the weakness of the Chalcedonian definition is that it said more negatively than positively, in that it asserts that the two natures were “without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation,” but it does not comment a great deal on the integration, adaptation, and inevitable (although limited) unity of the two natures.<sup>49</sup> This ambiguity resulted in continuing debates for the next fifteen centuries continuing to the present day.

*Continued debate from AD 451 to the Enlightenment*

One of the debates that surfaced in the years following the Council of Chalcedon was the question as to the number of wills within the person Jesus Christ. This debate became particularly pronounced in the 6d and 7d centuries. The essential question was, “Did the duality of natures in the Incarnate Christ entail a duality of wills?”<sup>50</sup> According to the *monothelites* (Gk. *mono* = one, *thelo* = will) the answer was no. For them there could only be one will, because there was only one person. Others were less willing to fuse the two wills, stating that the two natures necessitated the existence of two wills. Both groups claimed dependence on the Chalcedonian definition. The case was decided

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<sup>47</sup> Oxford, s.v. “*Incarnation*,” 825.

<sup>48</sup> Erickson, 730.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 730.

<sup>50</sup> Oxford, s.v. “*Incarnation*,” 825.

in favor of those who posited the notion of two wills at the sixth ecumenical council in AD 680.<sup>51</sup>

Another significant debate arose later among the Scholastics Thomas Aquinas (ca. AD 1225—74) and Duns Scotus (ca. AD 1265—1308) and their followers regarding two issues related to the Incarnation. The first question was whether or not the divine Word “adds” anything to the particular human nature of Jesus. The second question asked if the Incarnation would have taken place without the fall of man. Aquinas and his followers (known as Thomists) replied in the affirmative to both questions, while Scotus and his followers (known as Scotists) answered no to both questions.<sup>52</sup> There were no official church rulings on either of these issues.

Further refinements took place during the reformation as Martin Luther (AD 1483—1546) and John Calvin (AD 1509—1564) took up the patristic debate over the *communication idiomatum* (i.e. the communication of the divine attributes within the person of Christ).<sup>53</sup> In the Lutheran school of thought for the divine nature of Christ to remain divine his divine attributes must have been communicated to the person of Jesus, and thus Jesus Christ enjoyed full divinity, including omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience.<sup>54</sup> Calvin and his followers opposed this view, stating that the divine attributes were not fully communicated to Jesus and that he sometimes operated from his divine will and other times from his human will. The Calvinists feared that the Lutherans were coming dangerously close to the Eutychian heresy, while the Lutherans were

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<sup>51</sup> Grentz, 388—389.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, “*Incarnation*,” 675.

<sup>53</sup> As was noted in the prior section on *Kenosis* this debate resulted in varied forms of “*kenosis* theory”.

<sup>54</sup> An interesting application of this foundational belief is that because the human Jesus enjoys the divine attribute of omnipresence his body is truly present in the Eucharist (see Grentz, 389—390).

concerned that the Calvinists were not far from the Nestorian heresy.<sup>55</sup> The Church has never made an ecumenical ruling to decide this issue, a fact which Grentz sees as a positive recognition of the limitation of human understanding to conceive of the relationship between the two natures.<sup>56</sup>

Similar debates continued with the Geissen and Tübingen schools as to the exercise of divine powers by the incarnate Word. The Geissen school argued for a real self emptying abandonment of divine powers, while the Tübingen school saw it more in terms of a concealment of divine powers. These debates began to lay the groundwork for later discussions concerning the historical and psychological plausibility of the Incarnation.<sup>57</sup> But none of these debates paralleled the effect that the Enlightenment has had on theological discussions concerning the Incarnation.

#### *The Effect of the Enlightenment*

The Enlightenment (ca. AD 1750) brought both historical criticism of biblical sources and the philosophical criticism of supernaturalism and the entire conceptuality which the church inherited from the patristic age. As a result discussion of the doctrine of the Incarnation was re-opened after over a thousand years of general agreement and in the 1800's there arose a serious challenge to Incarnational Christology, especially among the liberal theologians. In many ways Friedrich Schleiermacher, often called the father of modern theology, led the charge in reshaping the Church's understanding of Christ. He challenged the "two nature" teaching of Chalcedon as incoherent and sought a Christology that looked at the historical man (Jesus of Nazareth) first, rather than at the eternal Son (the Logos). Despite the resistance of such formidable adversaries as Søren

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<sup>55</sup> Grentz, 389—390.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>57</sup> Williams, "Incarnation," 675.

Kierkegaard and Karl Barth his influence has remained strong in both Protestant and Catholic circles. Adherents to a “post-Schleiermacher” Christology do not believe that they have given up a belief in Incarnation, but rather have sought one that is more true and biblical.<sup>58</sup> Having examined the growth of the doctrine from its NT infancy, through the patristic era, the ecumenical councils, the Scholastic era, the Reformation and the Enlightenment we can now make some observations about the current view of the doctrine among evangelicals.

### *Part Three: The Contemporary Evangelical Witness*

#### *The Conservative View*

Despite the ongoing questions and the current theological debate, acceptance of the Chalcedonian statement, “remains the norm for the great majority of Christians”.<sup>59</sup> That is, evangelical Christians continue to affirm that “the eternal Son of God took flesh from His human mother and that the historical Christ is at once both fully God and fully man”.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, evangelicals assert “an abiding union in the Person of Christ of Godhead and manhood without the integrity or permanence of either being impaired”.<sup>61</sup>

Evangelicals further assert that “Jesus of Nazareth is both divine and human. He is both essential deity and essential humanity”.<sup>62</sup> They posit an important distinction between natures and persons, stating that the divine Person (the Son of God) did not join himself to a human person, which would have resulted in the creation of two persons, but

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<sup>58</sup> Macquarrie, “*Incarnation*,” 271—272. Macquarrie mentions J.A.T. Robinson and J.D.G. Dunn as current advocates of such a “non-incarnational” Christology.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>60</sup> Oxford, s.v. “*Incarnation*,” 825.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 825.

<sup>62</sup> Grentz, 397—398.

rather took on human nature. Thus statements about Jesus Christ are statements about a Person, not simply a “nature” or even two natures.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, the Son of God lived a historical existence in the flesh, accepting the limitations and constraints of an earthly existence.<sup>64</sup> This historical existence took place at a definite and known date of human history. The evangelical position is opposed to all theories of a mere theophany or transitory appearance of God in human form that is met with frequently in other religions.<sup>65</sup> Indeed the unique nature of the Christian conception of the Incarnation has been a distinctive hallmark of Christianity from the earliest definitions of the doctrine,<sup>66</sup> despite liberal claims to the contrary. As Erickson states, “The suggestion that the Incarnation of God in Jesus is paralleled in the teachings of other religions cannot be sustained. The doctrine of the Incarnation is radically different from the doctrine of divine immanence.”<sup>67</sup> Finally, the evangelical position continues to emphasize the “essential distinctness of the Lord’s Divine and human natures,”<sup>68</sup> in the face of liberal objections.

### *The Liberal View*

In stark contrast to the conservative evangelical view are a number of varied positions taken up by liberal scholars and theologians. Some view the essence of Christ’s Divinity in the complete conformity of His human will with that of God’s. Others question the appropriateness of the concept of the Incarnation for expressing the true

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<sup>63</sup> Reymond, “*Incarnation*,” 601.

<sup>64</sup> Macquarrie, “*Incarnation*,” 269.

<sup>65</sup> Oxford, s.v. “*Incarnation*,” 825.

<sup>66</sup> Williams, “*Incarnation*,” 674.

<sup>67</sup> Erickson, 681. For a closer examination of non-Christian religious traditions that are similar to the Incarnation see Ulrich Berner, “*Incarnation*,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 2, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 673—674.

<sup>68</sup> Oxford, s.v. “*Incarnation*,” 825.

salvific significance of Jesus.<sup>69</sup> In both cases they would see the Incarnation as something that is not to be taken literally. Such an approach certainly pre-dated but was popularized by a book edited by John Hick entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) wherein the essays build upon Rudolph Bultmann's program of "demythologizing" the NT. Hick's book was followed by one edited by Michael Goulder entitled *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (London: Oxford, 1979).<sup>70</sup> At the forefront of the liberal attack on the orthodox understanding of the Incarnation are a number of impressive theological figures including Rudolph Bultmann, Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, John Hick, and Karl Rahner.<sup>71</sup>

It is not within the scope of this paper to defend the evangelical position against the various attacks and questions that have been raised.<sup>72</sup> However, we should note that for all the intellectual trappings and complex explanations many of the liberal notions about the Incarnation are little more than restatements of old heresies. Erickson points out that there are four general approaches that have been taken to the Incarnation throughout history that ultimately lead to heresy, "(1) the idea that the man Jesus became God (adoptionism); (2) the idea that the divine being, God, took on impersonal humanity rather than an individual human personality (anhypostatic Christology); (3) the idea that the Second Person of the Trinity exchanged his deity for humanity (kenoticism); and (4) the idea that the Incarnation was the power of God present in a human (the doctrine of

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 825.

<sup>70</sup> For a helpful summary of the primary points laid out in the books see Erickson, 677—680.

<sup>71</sup> For a brief mention of each of their contributions to the debate see Williams, "Incarnation," 676. For a more thorough discussion of their theology see the corresponding articles in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Blackwell encyclopedia of modern Christian thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

<sup>72</sup> For a brief defense of the evangelical position in the light of the issues raised in Hick's *The Myth of God Incarnate* see Erickson, 680—681.

dynamic Incarnation).”<sup>73</sup> These four approaches almost always result in one of the six common heresies or a form of them, that is, “They either deny the genuineness (Ebionism) or the completeness (Arianism) of Jesus’ deity, deny the genuineness (Docetism) or the completeness (Apollinarianism) of his humanity, divide his person (Nestorianism), or confuse his natures (Eutychianism).”<sup>74</sup> Having said this however we should also note that the questions raised by liberal, and even some conservative, theologians have created what can be considered healthy and important dialogue concerning the implications of the Incarnation.

#### *Issues for Reflection*

Any attempt to understand the Incarnation invariably leads to reflection on a number of issues, including the theology of history, the involvement of God in contingency, *kenosis*, and God’s vulnerability. Furthermore, when we examine the Incarnation we are faced with the paradoxes of time and eternity, infinity and finitude.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to these considerations we have the far reaching implications of affirming both the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. Erickson notes that among other things Christ’s divinity suggests that through him we have access to “real”, material knowledge of God, access to redemption, and a basis for worshipping Christ. His humanity has implications for the efficacy of his atoning death, his ability to sympathize with our weakness, his expression of true humanity, his role as exemplar, the goodness of human nature, and God’s immanence.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Erickson, 730—731. See Erickson, 731—734 for an analysis of each of these approaches.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 738.

<sup>75</sup> Oxford, s.v. “*Incarnation*,” 825.

<sup>76</sup> Erickson, 721—722.

Erickson takes up several of these issues as a defense for the plausibility of the Incarnation. It has been said that the Incarnation is not possible because a perfect, transcendent, holy God cannot join himself to a sinful, finite humanity. Yet Erickson contends that to understand the Incarnation we must allow Jesus Christ to shape our definition of what is truly divine and what is truly human. Thus in the Incarnation we see that God is immanent as well as transcendent. Furthermore we see that God created man as a “good” being and can be joined to humankind when it is not tainted by sin.<sup>77</sup>

Among the far reaching implications of the Incarnation include issues related to ecclesiology. For instance, Erwin Fahlbusch points out that there are significant differences in the Incarnational theology of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Reformed churches. In his view these differences are often overlooked in the interest of ecumenical cooperation in certain worship forms. However, many of these forms (e.g. the Eucharist, baptism, ministry, etc.) are greatly impacted by the varied approaches to Incarnational theology and these differences must be reckoned with.<sup>78</sup>

As noted before, the liberal viewpoint doubtless has some insight that would prove beneficial to a discussion of the Incarnation. In a somewhat “post-Schleiermacher” manner Stanley Grenz suggests that the liberal position may serve as a needed corrective to what he sees as a historic over-emphasis on the initial act of Incarnation. In Grenz’ view the focus has rested too much on the historically pinpointed act of the eternal Logos becoming flesh and as such has inherent problems. He proposes that we should instead examine and define the Incarnation, and by extension Christology, from the perspective

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 736—737.

<sup>78</sup> Erwin Fahlbusch, “Incarnation,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 2, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 678—679.

of the first believers, that is by looking at Jesus' historical earthly life, death, and resurrection.<sup>79</sup>

Each of these issues deserves a great deal of prayer, thought and reflection. And these topics only scratch the surface of the meaning and implications of the Incarnation. It has been noted that the existence of Incarnation-like teachings in other religions points up to the desire of man to bridge the gap between the human and the divine in religion.<sup>80</sup> If indeed the eternal Son of God became a man and lived among men what a phenomenal bridge has been created!

### *Conclusion*

The Christian orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation makes a rather stunning and unique claim in that Christians believe that the eternal Son of God became a human being, maintaining a divine nature and a human nature within one Person. He lived a physical life, died a physical death, and was resurrected. Such a claim stands out from all other religious claims. Whereas there is ongoing debate as to the development of this doctrine in the NT there can be no doubt that it was a widespread enough idea during the patristic era so as to warrant a great deal of discussion and debate. With the tension between the Antiochian and Alexandrian schools and a string of heresies the doctrine was shaped over the course of nearly four hundred years and found a definitive statement at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451.

However, whereas this definition served to provide boundaries for the orthodox understanding of the Incarnation it also created a number of new questions. These questions continued to receive attention throughout the centuries from notable

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<sup>79</sup> Grentz, 402—405.

<sup>80</sup> Macquarrie, "Incarnation," 269.

theologians including Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Be that as it may the Chalcedonian definition remained an unquestioned decree up until the late 1800's when liberal theologians began to critically examine the creed. The influence of the liberal theologians has not been lost on evangelical Christianity and yet the majority of evangelicals still hold to the basic affirmations of the Chalcedonian creed.

As evangelicals enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century they are faced with numerous questions about the Incarnation. This single doctrine has wide ranging implications for theology, Christology, ecclesiology, *hamartology*, and countless other doctrines of the Christian faith. Evangelicals would do well to revisit the biblical passages that speak to this topic and the councils of the Church that were held to address it. They would also benefit from careful, critical dialogue with some liberal theologians who can offer needed correctives to historic imbalances and different perspectives that can contribute to a more complete appreciation of the import of the Incarnation.